

"The punished people": Crimean Tatars and prospects for integration into the Ukrainian society

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On May 18, 1999, Ukraine will mark yet another sorrowful date in its history: the 55th anniversary of forced displacement of the Crimean Tatar people from the Crimean peninsula. On May 18, 1944, Stalin's order to punish the entire people for alleged collaboration with Nazi troops during the occupation of the Crimea was implemented in forced resettlement of thousands of Crimean Tatar, mainly women, children and the elderly, to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Russia. According to official data, at least 180 thousand Crimean Tatars were deported from the Crimea, though some researchers estimate the total figure to be 230 thousand.

While in 1897 the Crimean Tatar population comprised 35 percent of the total population of the peninsula, the proportion decreased to 25 percent in 1921 and further to 19 percent in 1939. In 1979, Crimean Tatars comprised only 0.1 percent of Crimean residents. Immediately after the massive expulsion, the Crimean autonomy was liquidated and transformed into an ordinary region. Under the Soviet Union, Crimean Tatars were not allowed to settle in the Crimea. The process of returning to their homeland took several decades. Only on September 5, 1967, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union lifted accusations of treason made against the entire Crimean Tatar people, but the decree said nothing about giving them the right to return to the Crimea. It took another twenty years till the pressure of the Crimean Tatar movement was finalized in establishment, in July 1987, of a governmental commission authorized to address the issues of Crimean Tatars, followed by inclusion of the Crimean Tatar issue to the platform of the Communist party of the Soviet Union. The Ukrainian government became involved with the search for a solution to the issue at the end of 1989, when a special working group was created of representatives of ministries and departments of the Ukrainian SSR to develop plans for practical measures to be taken to initiate the process of repatriation of Crimean Tatars to their homeland. The State Commission of the USSR, established on January 29, 1990, included 5 representatives of the Crimean Tatar people.

Since 1991, Ukraine has carried the main burden of implementation of repatriation plans designed to assist Crimean Tatar to come back to the Crimea. Notwithstanding the task given by the central Soviet authorities, none of the former Soviet republics took part in funding the resettlement and accommodation process. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in August 1991, Ukraine had to face the challenge alone. On January 20, 1991, 81 percent of eligible voters took part in the Crimean referendum, and 93.26 percent supported the restoration of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, a subject of the USSR and a signatory of the Union Treaty. Shortly afterwards, on February 12, 1991, the Ukrainian Supreme Council legitimized the Crimean referendum by means of adopting a law that restored the Crimean ASSR within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

The issue of Crimean Tatars' return to the Crimea and integration into the Ukrainian society has multiple aspects and faces a number of challenges, as it involves the return of the entire people to the place where it once belonged. The repatriation process involves economic, legal, political and humanitarian issues. Their solution has been challenged by the general economic crisis of the Ukrainian state in transition, as well as by the lack of sufficient political stability in the Crimea. From the very start, the repatriation process has been accompanied by the need to resolve some difficulties that could effectively put it in jeopardy. While the state planned to make the process manageable and consistent, Crimean Tatars who had had the previous negative experience of confronting the government's opposition to their strife for restoring their identity, did not want to yield to any plans as they had certain doubts in stability of the authorities' good intentions and, therefore, sought to use the given right to return to their homeland as soon as possible, without waiting till decision-makers changed their mind. Therefore, shortly the process was out of control, and the state could do little but admit it.

At the beginning the repatriation was mainly chaotic and went on by means of unauthorized settlement on "nobody's land". The Crimean local authorities vehemently opposed the arrival of new settlers. The situation became particularly tense in early 1990s, when Crimean Tatar had to wait for official permission to occupy certain pieces of land and formal registration of residence for months. In October 1992, this inadequate position of local authorities resulted in a major clash in the Krasnyi Rai town, when a number of Crimean Tatars were evicted by the police. Although the conflict was not a typical

ethnicity-based confrontation, it was perceived as a clash between local authorities and the Crimean Tatar residents. Subsequently, the government drew adequate conclusions from the conflict, and allocated about US\$ 300,000 for accommodation of Crimean Tatars. However, that did not solve the problem. Until now about 48 percent of Crimean Tatar repatriants (about 110,000 persons) still do not have their own housing, and about 20 thousand of families are unable to finish construction of their homes because of the lack of funds to buy increasingly more expensive construction materials. Crimean Tatar compact settlements lack basic infrastructure: 70 percent of them do not have potable water, and over 25 percent lack electricity. Another acute problem is the growing unemployment among Crimean Tatars: of 133.1 thousand of potentially employable persons only 66.8 thousand actually have jobs, though most of them had to take jobs other than their regular profession. A relatively high proportion of repatriated Crimean Tatars suffer from disease, in particular, tuberculosis. In general, the occurrence of disease among Crimean Tatars is almost twice as high as among average statistics for the Crimea. 98 thousand of Crimean Tatars (about 40 percent of the whole Crimean Tatar population on the peninsula) still do not have Ukrainian citizenship. Other challenges include unsolved issues of language, education and culture.

So far, the most substantial assistance to the process of accommodation of returning deportees and their integration into the Ukrainian society has been provided by international donor organizations. Within the recent three years, the assistance granted by the international donors amounted to US\$ 10 million, including US\$ 2 million contributed by the UNDP, US\$ 2 million contributed by the UNHRC, US\$ 700 thousand granted by the International Renaissance Foundation, and the assistance provided by Turkey. Although significant, this amount is insufficient to make a difference in addressing social and economic challenges. According to expert estimates, the solution of the whole host of social, economic, political, legal and national-cultural issues of the repatriated Crimean Tatars will cost about US\$ 2 billion.

For all the importance of social and economic issues of accommodation and integration of Crimean Tatars, there are other critical issues to be addressed. These issues of rather different contents, involve political and legal aspects of integration.

Although Crimean Tatar national movement has been relatively consolidated and consistent in its strife for its goals, it did not avoid some internal political differences. Currently the Crimean Tatar national movement is represented by several major organizations: the Organization of the Crimean Tatar National Movement (OCTNM) and the National Movement of Crimean Tatars (NMCT). From the beginning, the NMCT has advocated cooperation with the Soviet, and later the Crimean authorities. The group's agenda stipulated that the movement opposed "any attempt to divide the population of the Crimea into two antagonistic vying camps"; it was argued that the "Slavic Turks" (i.e., Crimean Tatars, Russians and Ukrainians) in the Crimea had a remarkable chance to create and develop a working model for a Slavic-Turkish "superunion". According to the agenda, the Crimea was expected to become a key to the future might and well-being of all peoples of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Instead, the Organization of the Crimean Tatar National Movement (OCTNM) consistently called for granting the Crimea the status of a Crimean Tatar national territorial autonomy. The Crimean Tatar congress, Kurultai, initiated by the OCTNM in June 1991, adopted the "Declaration of National Sovereignty of the Crimean Tatar People". The Kurultai elected the Medjlis, the supreme representative body of Crimean Tatars, so far having no official recognition by the Ukrainian state. Commenting on the purpose of the new body, chairman of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis Mustafa Dzhemilev indicated that "the Medjlis, elected by the Kurultai, will perform the functions of a public national self-governance body of Crimean Tatars. Obviously, it's activity will be carried out within the framework of international law." After Ukraine declared its independence on August 24, 1991, the Medjlis took the side of Ukraine and advocated the restoration of the Crimean Tatar national-territorial autonomy within Ukraine, while consistently opposing separatist moods dominating the Crimean authorities in 1992-1995.

The creation of the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea has been bitterly criticized by the Medjlis which saw the formation as contradictory to the OCTNM's goal of establishing a Crimean Tatar national-territorial autonomy within the Ukrainian state. In 1991, the OCTNM leaders argued that "the state status of national territories cannot be decided by arithmetic majority of citizens who were resettled from other territories", a reference to the predominantly ethnic Russian population encouraged to migrate to the Crimea after the forced expulsions of Crimean Tatars from the peninsula. The Crimean Tatars' leadership's official position, expressed by the Central Council of the OCTNM in the appeal to the International Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, could be summarized in the claim that the creation of yet another "Russian-speaking republic" in the Crimean Tatars' historic homeland automatically violated the Crimean Tatar people's rights. According to the last Soviet census of 1989,

the population of the Crimean peninsula was 67.04 percent Russian, 25.75 percent Ukrainian and about 12% Crimean Tatar, a reality that could no longer be ignored.

In the mid-1990s, Crimean Tatars demanded to treat them not as a national minority but as the Crimea's indigenous people, and grant them adequate rights and opportunities. However, so far little progress has been made in addressing the issue. Although the challenge is not new for Ukraine - the law "On National Minorities" was adopted in June 1992, and Articles 11, 92 and 119 of the Ukrainian constitution use the term "indigenous peoples" - the notion has not been officially recognized, and criteria for applying it to a particular ethnic group have not been specified.

The problem of political representation of Crimean Tatars in the bodies of power remains especially sensitive. While the introduction of quotas for ethnic minorities had resulted in election of 14 representatives of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis to the Crimean Supreme Council in 1994, not a single Crimean Tatar candidate was elected the autonomy's supreme legislative body after the abolition of quotas shortly before the 1998 elections. There are two Crimean Tatars in the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada: chairman of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis Mustafa Dzhemilev was elected through the election list of the Ukrainian People's Movement Rukh, and his deputy Refat Chubarov won a seat in a majoritarian constituency.

Today the proportion of Crimean Tatars in the Crimean Council of Ministers (government), Crimean and national ministries and departments, local councils and executive committees remains insignificant, and, except the staff of the Crimean Committee for Nationalities and Deportees and local inter-ethnic relations sections, does not exceed 1.5 percent - which, according to some Crimean Tatar leaders, is a sign of discrimination of the 12 percent of the Crimean population.

The repatriation process is seriously complicated by the lack of adequate legislation. So far, a long-expected comprehensive governmental program designed to facilitate the repatriation and rational accommodation of Crimean Tatars remains a matter of the future. And, as a result, the government's involvement in solving the issue of repatriation of the Crimean Tatars has been reduced to performing a "permissive function", and Crimean Tatars have to face most of the practical challenges on their own, counting on the assistance of international organizations and their own resources.

Hence, complex problems are waiting for their solutions, and the ability to find those solutions will determine stability and security not only in the Crimea and Ukraine but, in a broader geopolitical sense, in the whole European region.